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Rico's silver mines leave a tarnished legacy

EPA finds lead in soil; costly cleanup looms

By And this historic silver mining town high in the mountains of southwestern Colorado is in for a daunting dig.

This is the mining legacy: Natural lead has been here forever; concentrated mine waste has been around since 1879. The scope and details of the cleanup are staggering. And the Environmental Protection Agency says it must happen in Rico over the next two years.

Nobody knows yet how much lead-contaminated dirt will be moved, where it will go, how much the cleanup will cost or even who will do it.

But about 100 people came to the Town Hall here last week. They listened for more than two hours while EPA officials confirmed the results of soil tests and told them what to expect from the cleanup.

In a community of just more than 200 people, some 40 residential yards and 14 other properties have been tested since August. The EPA confirmed that 47 of the properties have lead levels greater than 500 parts per million, well above the 400 ppm toxicity trigger for EPA action. Several properties have lead levels of 3,000 ppm. One old mill site has a level of 91,000 ppm.

And testing is not over, the EPA said.

Rico, which has worked hard to reinvent itself as a haven for outdoor enthusiasts, reacted strongly last November to the EPA's first alarm about mining-related lead contamination. Town officials said then that any designation of Rico as a Superfund site or target for other severe action could be the death knell for its tentative economic recovery.

Still, after hearing last Wednesday from an avuncular EPA official named Al Lange, who talked the town through the eye-popping particulars of cleanup, at least some residents seemed to accept the situation.

One woman who moved to Rico in 1998 said there was no point arguing with the EPA.

"If we've got lead, we've got to get it out," Catherine Allen said. "We knew when we moved here it was a mining district."

Residents won't be charged for cleanup. More dirt samples will be collected, dried and ground up with mortar and pestle. About a minute of X-ray fluorescence spectrometry per sample will identify up to 24 different elements. So far, only lead seems to be a problem, but it can lower IQs in children, damage their nervous systems, prevent absorption of vitamin D, cause anemia, reduce kidney function and raise blood pressure.

Rico will be divided into zones. Every property with elevated lead will be mapped down to the last tree, Lange said. The landowner will sign off on a plan. The dirt will be removed by heavy equipment and big trucks.

"There will be no dust, whatever it takes," Lange said. "That costs us a lot of money."

The EPA hauled almost 2 million gallons of water for miles to suppress dust in one high-desert burg in Utah, but Rico is a river town.

Trees in yards will be removed and then brought back, if wanted. Or, trees can stay in place, but workers will dig out the contaminated dirt around their roots, Lange said.

Sidewalks are a good barrier to lead. They probably will stay put, he said. But, for instance, a badly cracked patio would be replaced. Sheds will be removed and later returned.

When the new, clean dirt comes, residential yards can be regraded into any kind of reasonable landscape design, depending on what landowners asked for, Lange said. Grass will be replanted. It won't be allowed to die.

Rico's dirt roads, which is just about all of them but the highway, should be tested and might be paved, but that is one of many alternatives, said EPA Region 8's assistant administrator, Max Dodson.

"A lot of work needs to be done," Dodson said.

The EPA still could take action or order action by one potential responsible party, the Atlantic Richfield Co., known as Arco. Or, the EPA could approve a voluntary cleanup plan proposed by Arco and submitted in draft form to the state health department last week.

The decision has not been made, said Dodson. Nor has listing Rico as a Superfund site been ruled out.

There was good news about Rico's water. Samples from most streams and from groundwater met federal standards, despite years of untreated discharge of mineral-laden water from an old mining tunnel into the Dolores River. While zinc levels are high for sensitive fish, dilution appears to be handling it for humans. Rico's streams and hot springs are safe for recreation, the EPA said. The drinking water supply is fine.